

## **The Australian Animal Health Laboratory**

Australia's pastoral and dairy industries have always contributed significantly to Australia's export income, which reached a peak during the two decades from the mid-1940s of 50-60% of the total value of all exports. Hence, any factors that could reduce the value of these exports, such as the introduction of the exotic diseases foot-and-mouth disease (FMD), bluetongue and rinderpest, deserved serious consideration. One has only to understand the economic and social consequences of the outbreaks of FMD in the UK in 1967 and 2001 to appreciate the devastation that an outbreak of this disease could bring to Australia.

In the early 1960s, the Australian Veterinary Association advocated the establishment of a central laboratory that, among other responsibilities, would provide a nucleus of trained workers who could be called on in an emergency to diagnose exotic diseases and so support control and eradication programmes.

Following a review in 1964 of Australia's preparedness to control outbreaks of FMD and other vesicular diseases, the Australian Agricultural Council (AAC) through its various sub-committees investigated the need for a high security laboratory. In 1970, the AAC agreed that there was an urgent need for the laboratory, determined its functions, and asked the CSIRO to examine the feasibility of providing, staffing and managing such a laboratory.

The two major political parties supported the establishment of the laboratory, which subsequently became known as the Australian Animal Health Laboratory (AAHL). It was the Labor government that decided on 1 April 1974 that it should be built at Geelong, Victoria, but it was not until 1978 that the Liberal Coalition government provided finance to begin construction, which was completed and the laboratory officially opened on 1 April 1985.

Since AAHL became operational, it has developed the capability to diagnose many exotic diseases, including FMD, and frequently examines specimens from outbreaks of disease to exclude exotic diseases as the cause. AAHL carries out training courses for field veterinarians in the early recognition of exotic diseases, and has undertaken extensive research programmes, which have improved the speed and accuracy of diagnosis for a number of diseases including Newcastle disease, avian influenza and bluetongue. It has also played a significant role in the identification of 'new' viral pathogens such as Hendra virus and other bat-related viruses.

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